WHEN DID WE ALL GET SO EXTRA?

From bedside tables holding the entire Booker Prize longlist to taking on casual social media challenges like running 100k in a month, taking hobbies to the extreme has become second nature. With the stakes increased, and the humblebrag becoming a new benchmark, what's the cost to your health?

Image manipulation | COLIN BEAGLEY

The second half of March was... weird. Toilet roll was suddenly a covetable commodity, news programmes became the new Netflix and society was engaged in a real-time social experiment to determine whether we could live our lives entirely through Instagram Stories and Houseparty. The first few days of lockdown were fairly easy-going and, for those non-key workers, potentially liberating; we're talking cats perched on laptops, seeing your boss manhandle their kids during video calls and trying creative recipes making the most of tinned beans. It was around a week into lockdown when confinement became competitive. How hours spent self-isolating were filled – decluttering the house from top to bottom, creating tablescapes worthy of an East London supper club, enrolling in e-courses and committing to daily fitness challenges – morphed into collective one-upmanship.

MAJOR LEAGUE

The reactions spawned by enforced social distancing indicate that we're living in an age of extremes. Take fitness. Participation in 5k races has dropped 13% over the past two years, while ultrarunning – racking up distances *beyond* 26.2 miles – has grown by 345% in a decade, and Triathlon England reports a 230% increase in female members between 2009 and 2018. If this more-is-more attitude is pervading your workouts, it's also infecting your free time – or what's left of it. A recent white paper by Henley Business School found that 37% of those aged between 25 and 34 run a side hustle alongside their day job, such as a craft business, an e-commerce site or a blog. Even reading, once the most inconspicuous of bedtime activities, is now a competitive discipline. There are 1.4 million posts using the hashtag #readinglist on Instagram, where users share their progress with the uncontained excitement of someone who's just found a tenner in the pocket of an old jacket. But beyond a bolstered social following and a developed opinion on the merits of Mantel over Burton, is taking everything to extremes actually doing you any good?

Psychotherapist Hilda Burke, author of *The Phone Addiction Workbook*, believes the expectations and demands you place on yourself are higher than ever because quantifying your achievements is both easier (apps tracking every metric, from hours slept to productivity) and more public (if you didn't share a screengrab of your 30,000 steps, did it even happen?). 'Shareable data makes it very easy to benchmark how well (or not) you're doing compared with others, and so activities that previously allowed you to shift gear and switch off have become intensely goal-driven,' she explains. Case in point: Strava. The performance-monitoring app that lets you time your runs and bike rides – and see how you fared against your peers – gains a staggering one million new users every 30 days, with uploads from women having increased by 59% over the past two years. Dr Chris Shambrook, former psychological consultant for the GB Olympic rowing team, now leadership director at performance strategy firm Planet K2, observes that with increased public commitment to exercise come more extreme behaviours. 'The desire to beat yourself has elevated hugely,' he says, pointing to the infinite opportunities technology has given us to compete against ourselves (oh, who are you kidding?) and others in our demographic. Factor in the gamification of fitness – everything from the hotly contended leader board in spin class to franchises like Orangetheory Fitness that strap a heart-rate monitor to your arm and live-broadcast data on how hard you're working – and, like a teenager pulling an all-nighter to complete a video game, you won't stop until you level up.

DRASTIC MEASURES

There's nothing quite like filling the rings on your Apple Watch or being the friend everyone comes to for TV recommendations because you've completed Netflix way before anyone else. However, research suggests that extreme behaviour is a matter beyond just personal pride. Carys Egan-Wyer, a researcher at Lund University School of Economics and Management in Sweden, shadowed 33 endurance runners to unravel what motivated their desire. During her research, published last year, Egan-Wyer noted two things. First, that the runners became so fixated on quantifying their training achievements that it caused great discomfort if anything got in the way; one runner confessed that if her sports watch ran out of battery mid-run, she'd give up and go home in frustration (we've all been there). Second, participants chose to publicly list their extreme sporting achievements on their CVs, workplace websites and dating app bios. Egan-Wyer realised that these runners weren't just exhausting themselves for a medal, but for socio-economic rewards. 'Endurance sport achievements hold currency in various aspects of life,' she explains. 'It's called exchange value, which means gaining social status by creating an image or a personal brand that can help "buy" you things: jobs, clients, dates and so on.' The same theory can be applied to, say, competitive reading ('I'm cultured'), holidaying off the beaten track ('I'm adventurous') and donating to charity ('I'm altruistic').

'Activities that previously allowed you to shift gear and switch off have become intensely goal-driven'

The problem is, this can cause issues around self-acceptance. So says clinical neurologist Dr Mara Klemich, co-author of *Above The Line: Living And Leading With Heart*. 'When an "average" person looks like they're having a better time than you, or enjoying more success, you think, "Why not me?"' she says. 'It's not so much putting the other person on a pedestal; it's knowing that what they have is within your reach but somehow you're missing out.' She gives the example of increased exposure to stories of people who've turned their hobbies into side hustles, from 19-year-old start-up millionaires to status quo disruptors like Greta Thunberg. 'Constantly being exposed to these people and stories leads you to believe that you can do it, too, if not better. In order to be seen as interesting and significant, you push yourself to do more in every aspect of your life – and it shifts the bar for everyone.'

Gillian Harvey can relate. The 40-year-old writer and author of *Everything Is Fine* had always wanted to be published, but once that goal came to fruition, rather than celebrate, she moved the goal posts of success. 'Now I'm thinking: "Will it 'count' if it doesn't do well? I have a contract for a second, but will there be a third?"' Pushing herself to extremes seeped into other areas of Gillian's life, to the point that she recently took up the cello after playing in school. 'I immediately started working towards grade eight – the top level – to prove that I could play properly. I pushed myself to take exams, but had so little time to practise between parenting and working that I'd turn up to lessons in a cold sweat. It became yet another thing to beat myself up about and I ended up selling the cello to get rid of the stress.'

OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE

Beyond the compare-and-despair narrative, what could be driving this? Extreme behaviour is a rational response to extreme uncertainty, says Dr Christopher Cain. A scientist at the Emotional Brain Institute, he researches the brain circuitry behind the mind's ability to handle fear. 'More intense anxiety or fear impairs the higher-order, cortex-mediated brain functions needed for reasoning. So, it could lead to more intense coping actions,' he explains, pointing to recent research that found that dopamine is released when a rat physically moves to escape a threat. Throw yourself head first into a hobby – in the manner of a self-isolator on their third living-room workout of the day – and it helps to remove you from the threat stimuli (read: dire news coverage)

and release feel-good dopamine, which reinforces that doing an activity was a good idea. May we refer you to 32-year-old Elisha Nochomovitz running an entire marathon on his seven-metre-long balcony in Toulouse during France's nationwide lockdown?

Even in 'ordinary' times, going to extremes can be a natural reaction to not feeling fully in control of your life. A study in the *Journal Of Consumer Research* gave participants a low-effort or a high-effort option and found people favoured the more extreme route when their sense of control was lower. Researcher Dr Keisha Cutright explains: 'Effort is a primary means of control; so when control is low, we want to restore it.' Be that via aesthetic elements in your environment – keeping house plants alive – or embracing hard work – signing up to a Tough Mudder. While unable to empathise with the extreme exercisers among us, *WH* Features Director Nikki Osman, 32, understands the link between extreme behaviour and control. 'Last year, life felt a bit chaotic when my partner's career change led us to move out of our own house into rented accommodation in a different area, and our finances took a hit, too,' she explains. Her reaction? 'I became obsessive about planning meals. I'd dedicate whole Sundays to prepping soups and stews and became fixated with hitting nutrition markers. I think knowing what I was going to be eating for the week ahead became a way of reclaiming an element of control over my life. But it reached the point where I'd feel anxious if weekend plans took me away from the kitchen...'

Burke isn't surprised to hear the 'A' word, because while the motivation for extreme behaviour stems from good intentions, continually raising the bar on personal productivity can be destructive. 'It means you sacrifice rest time,' she says. Even something as seemingly innocuous as powering through your must-listen podcasts during workouts means your brain never gets any downtime. The fallout? 'You run the risk of burnout, which can manifest in many forms: extreme fatigue, self-doubt, questioning the point of life or feeling useless because you can't push through the exhaustion.' Burke points to the emergence and persistence of mental health issues associated with extreme behaviour – perfectionism, overtraining syndrome, orthorexia and orthosomnia (a preoccupation with data-tracking the perfect night's sleep) – as proof that the gear shift from ordinary to extreme can have very real repercussions for your health.

AN OWN GOAL

So when does achieving become counter-productive? Dr Shambrook highlights two markers. 'An early sign that your target is toxic could be language,' he says. 'If your self-talk centres around being compelled – "I *have* to do something, I must, I should" – rather than of choice and curiosity – "Do I feel like baking today?"' Another way of tuning into your motivation is noting the feeling that arises when you can't or don't do it. 'Guilt around not achieving is a sign that you've stopped doing something for enjoyment and would benefit from reframing goals back to satisfaction, rather than hitting numbers.' Burke has a similar test that she uses with clients. Imagine you had to drop out of a fitness challenge – maybe you pulled a hamstring or, as likely this summer, an event was postponed. If your reaction is, 'That's annoying, but I can deal with it,' that's a sign you're doing the extreme event because you enjoy it. But if you feel frustrated about telling others your plans have changed or envious of others who can still achieve their goals, it seems your motivation may be more aligned with boosting your ego or elevating your social status.

As for *how* to find contentment in the average, Burke is a big fan of meditation, which can train you to exist without external validation. 'It slows your mind down from always poking you with, "What are we doing next?" In meditation, you're completely at one with achieving nothing,' she explains. As for sweating it out for the stats? 'Instead of waiting to be told how you did, and letting that figure pick at your emotions, take control of the experience rather than letting tech control you,' Dr Shambrook suggests. 'The idea that if it's not on Strava it doesn't exist is really not very helpful.'

For Gillian, it was understanding where the urge was coming from – being bullied at school; having a high-achieving brother – that helped her shift the emphasis from doing things for external validation to doing what makes her happy. As for Nikki, when uncertainty kicked in on a global scale, she realised batch-cooking can only get you so far. 'My initial response to lockdown was to ramp up everything I was doing – cooking included – in order to make this time at home as productive as possible. But there's a kind of reluctant acceptance in losing control on a much larger plane and, after a few days, that desire levelled off into something a bit healthier, and I started to slow down.' WH

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WORDS: GEMMA ASKHAM; PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

LEAN INTO AVERAGE

Who better to preach about embracing 'normal' than the woman who wrote a book on the subject: Catherine Gray, author of The Unexpected Joy Of The Ordinary (£14.99, Aster)

1
IS BEING ABLE TO DO A HEADSTAND ON A PADDLEBOARD USEFUL?

'I'll level with you: I really want to be able to do this,' says Gray. 'But only for one reason: to Insta-brag. Remember what skills are actually useful and what you're only interested in developing for social currency.'

2
EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES HAVE A COMEDOWN

What goes up must come down. In 2014, Harvard psychologists showed one group of people a film rated four stars, while another group saw a two-star movie. The four-star group may have seen the better film, but they felt so excluded from their peers' conversation afterwards – all discussing the two-starrer – that they actually felt *worse* than those who'd viewed the dud. Participants concluded that they would have felt better if they'd had an ordinary experience instead.

3
BEING RICH WON'T SOLVE EVERYTHING

We know from studies that lottery winners' happiness levels return to baseline a year after a win, meaning they're no happier than the control group of regular non-winners. What is less well-known is that the lottery winners became less able to feel the joy of 'mundane pleasures' (a cup of tea and a biscuit; a lie-in).

4
DON'T FORGET WHAT YOU *HAVE* DONE

In a bustling restaurant in Vienna, Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik noticed that as soon as serving staff had fulfilled an order, they forgot all about it. You do the same with your achievements. You swivel and look at the next metaphorical order. Writing a 'well done me' list might feel offensive to a British sensibility, but it's a useful tool for self-reflection.